



## Narcissism through the ages: What happens when narcissists grow older?

Phebe Cramer

Department of Psychology, Williams College, Williamstown, MA 01267, United States

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### ABSTRACT

Three types of adult narcissism, as assessed with Wink's (1991) observational rating method, were studied over a period of 25 years, with participants from the Intergenerational Studies of the Institute of Human Development, UC Berkeley. Narcissism was assessed on three occasions, from age 34 to age 59. Hypersensitive narcissism was found to decrease, Autonomous narcissism increased, and Willfulness narcissism did not change with age. At age 34, both Willfulness and Autonomous narcissism were related to agentic personality characteristics, but only Autonomous narcissism was related to the communal personality characteristic of empathy. Change in narcissism between age 34 and age 59 was shown to predict change in personality at age 71. The agentic personality characteristics that had been associated with Willfulness narcissism at age 34 were no longer characteristic of those individuals at age 71. In addition, in contrast to Autonomous narcissism, at age 34 Willfulness and Hypersensitivity were associated with emotional maladjustment, and predicted continuing maladjustment and less favorable life outcomes in later life.

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**When I get older losing my hair,  
Many years from now  
Will you still be sending me a valentine  
Birthday greetings, bottle of wine.**

.....  
**Will you still need me, will you still feed me,  
When I'm sixty-four.**

**The Beatles  
When I'm Sixty-Four**

Narcissism is generally defined as having a highly positive or inflated self-concept, a strong need to be admired by others, fantasizing about fame or power, responding to criticism with self-enhancing attribution, being condescending toward others, and lacking commitment and caring in interpersonal relationships (e.g., Campbell, Rudich, & Sedikides, 2002; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Narcissists must continuously ascertain whether others admire them and will meet their egotistic needs (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). The central question for the narcissist, as in the lyrics above, is "will you provide me with the positive recognition that I require, and will you (metaphorically) feed me the admiration I desire?" The lyrics raise the additional question, "Will you continue to treat me this way as I grow old(er)?"

Although the characteristics indicated above may lead to a clinical diagnosis of Narcissistic Personality Disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), narcissism may also exist at a sub-

clinical level, sometimes characterized as "normal" narcissism (Sedikides, Rudich, Gregg, Kumashiro, & Rusbult, 2004). It is this type of narcissism that we study in this paper.

Narcissists tend to be characterized as rather unpleasant people – selfish, overly dominant, hostile and arrogant (e.g., Colvin, Block, & Funder, 1995; Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). However, some narcissists fare quite well, have successful careers and are lauded by the public. They convey an aura of charm and social facility, making them initially attractive (Morf & Rhodewalt, 2001). Narcissists are likely to be drawn to high pressure, high profile professions where their self-confidence and wish for admiration serves them well (Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). Indeed, research shows that many sought after celebrities from the entertainment world are more narcissistic than the general population (Young & Pinsky, 2006), and it has been suggested that narcissism underlies the behavior that draws crowds to admire them (Grigoriadis, 2005). For example, narcissists perform better in public than non-narcissists, when they can be admired for their achievements (Campbell et al., 2002; Wallace & Baumeister, 2002). Thus, in early adulthood, narcissism is often associated with desirable self-enhancing personality characteristics, and these features contribute to the initial likeability of narcissistic individuals (e.g., Oltmanns, Friedman, Fiedler, & Turkheimer, 2004; Sedikides & Gregg, 2001).

Moreover, recent research has shown that narcissism is associated with popularity at first sight, before any interpersonal interaction has taken place. This immediate popularity of narcissists is based on several observable characteristics, including charming

E-mail address: [phebe.cramer@williams.edu](mailto:phebe.cramer@williams.edu)

facial expression, self-assured body movements, humorous verbal expression, and wearing attractive attire (Back, Schmukle, & Egloff, 2010; Vazire, Naumann, Rentfrow, & Gosling, 2008). The admiration received from others, which is based on these behavioral characteristics, likely reinforces both the attractive characteristics of dominance, leadership and authority, and the other less desirable characteristics of narcissism (e.g., exploitation and entitlement). However, in the long run, the negative features of narcissism are likely to result in interpersonal rejection (Campbell & Foster, 2002; Paulhus, 1998; Sedikides & Gregg, 2001; Vazire & Funder, 2006).

## 1. Narcissism and aging

The majority of studies of narcissism have been carried out with young adults.

Little is known about narcissism in older age, and there have been no longitudinal published studies examining the development of narcissism from early adulthood to older age. Roberts, Edmonds, and Grijalva (2010) suggested that narcissism should decrease with age, since the narcissistic characteristic of not making commitments to others runs counter to normative pathways. Supporting this, a large scale, *cross-sectional* study of NPI narcissism found a steady decrease in narcissism between age 15 and 54, with a small increase after age 55 (Foster, Misra, & Reidy, 2009). The present study tracks the *longitudinal* developmental trajectory of narcissism from age 34 to age 59.

Since clinical evidence indicates that beneath the surface grandiosity of the narcissistic personality, these individuals often have an underlying sense of low self-worth (Freud, 1957; Kohut, 1977; Millon, 1981),<sup>1</sup> there is reason to think that the underlying self-doubts and insecurities may fail to support the continuation of the early personality characteristics that contribute to the attractiveness of narcissists. Thus, the present study also focuses on whether the personality traits associated with narcissism at age 34 continue to characterize these narcissists at an older age, or whether the early “bloom” has faded as these individuals grow older.

## 2. Types of narcissism

There is considerable research showing that there are different types, or manifestations of narcissism, depending on whether the narcissism is maladaptive or adaptive (Cramer & Jones, 2008; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010; Raskin, Novacek, & Hogan, 1991; Russ, Shedler, Bradley, & Westen, 2008; Wink, 1992). Narcissism may impede psychological growth (e.g., Colvin et al., 1995; Paulhus, 1998; Wallace & Baumeister, 2002) or may contribute to positive psychological development (e.g., Sedikides et al., 2004; Smalley & Skyke, 1996).

Regarding maladaptive narcissism, Cain, Pincus, and Ansell (2008) note that although more than 50 different labels have been used to describe different manifestations of narcissism, a conceptual analysis of these variations reveals two broad themes of dysfunction. One theme focuses on the grandiose aspect of narcissism; the other reflects the vulnerable aspects (see also Bosson et al., 2008). These two types of narcissism have been characterized as “Willful” and “Hypersensitive”, respectfully (Wink, 1991, 1992). *Willful* narcissism is characterized by an open expression of grandiosity, self-confidence, condescension, dominance and extraversion, in which there is willful manipulation and exploitation of others (Miller et al., in press; Raskin & Novacek, 1989; Wink,

1992; Zeigler-Hill, Clark, & Piekard, 2008). This grandiose type of maladaptive narcissism is positively related to scores on the self-report Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Miller et al., in press), which also includes scales that assess adaptive narcissism (NPI: Raskin & Hall, 1979; Raskin & Terry, 1988). *Hypersensitive* narcissism is characterized by oversensitivity to perceived slight or failed appreciation on the part of others, based on the need to maintain an underlying grandiose self-image, and is accompanied by chronic feelings of humiliation and rejection (Cain et al., 2008; Miller et al., in press; Rhodwalt & Morf, 1995; Wink, 1992; Zeigler-Hill, et al., 2008). The characteristics of Willful narcissists are evidenced in their manifest behavior, while for Hypersensitive narcissists they are more concealed “beneath a façade of inhibition” (Bosson et al., 2008, p. 1428). Because Hypersensitive narcissists tend to keep the grandiosity hidden, they are sometimes referred to as “closet” narcissists (e.g., Masterson, 1993). This Hypersensitive type of narcissism is unrelated to total scores on the CPI Narcissism scale (Miller et al., in press).

In addition to these two dysfunctional, maladaptive forms of narcissism, Pincus and Lukowitsky (2010) have discussed how narcissism may also be manifest in an adaptive personality organization. Adaptive narcissism is characterized by healthy ambitions, feelings of vitality, creativity and empathy in adulthood (Kohut, 1971; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010; Russ et al., 2008; Wink, 1992). Adaptive narcissism may also be associated with overly high ambitions, but in addition is characterized by having sufficient interpersonal sensitivity so as not to suffer the eventual interpersonal rejection that is often experienced in association with maladaptive narcissism. Pincus and Lukowitsky (2010) indicate that both Wink’s *Autonomy* scale (Wink, 1991, 1992) and the High Functioning/Exhibitionistic type identified by Russ et al. (2008) assess the adaptive type of narcissism.

Adaptive narcissism supports striving toward and achievement of goals and successful careers (Wink, 1991). In contrast, maladaptive narcissism is characterized by self-aggrandizement, power seeking and condescension (Raskin et al., 1991) in which an inflated sense of self masks underlying feelings of vulnerability and insecurity, of which the individual is generally unaware, except in time of crisis or failure (Kernberg, 1975; Kohut, 1976). A critical difference between adaptive narcissism and maladaptive narcissism is that the explicit personality dispositions of adaptive narcissism are supported by an underlying implicit sense of self that is firm and cohesive, whereas the explicit personality of maladaptive narcissists covers an implicit sense of self that is poorly integrated, unstable, and vulnerable (Bosson et al., 2008). An important difference between Willful and Hypersensitive narcissists is that the former regulate their self-esteem through behavioral strategies, whereas Hypersensitive narcissists fail to engage in overt self-enhancement behaviors and rely primarily on the approval of others (Zeigler-Hill et al., 2008).

## 3. Narcissism and emotional maladjustment

Several studies (e.g., Campbell, 2001; Raskin & Novacek, 1989; Sedikides et al., 2004; Zuckerman & O’Loughun, 2009) have found NPI Narcissism to be associated with psychological well-being. Pincus et al. (2009) have suggested that the positive relation of the NPI to psychological well-being is likely due to the NPI assessing primarily adaptive narcissism. When NPI scores were divided into adaptive and maladaptive narcissism, Watson and Biderman (1993) found that whereas the Adaptive scores were negatively related to depression and anxiety, the Maladaptive scores showed positive relations with depression and anxiety. More recently, Rosenthal and Hooley (2010) have demonstrated that the positive relation between the NPI and psychological health is a result of the overlap of the NPI with self-reported self-esteem.

<sup>1</sup> This finding is also shown in experimental studies in which the most highly narcissistic individuals are those with high explicit Self-esteem (SE) but low implicit SE (e.g., Zeigler-Hill, 2006).

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